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[Title page]

Reviewing and Extending the Five-user Assumption: a Grounded Procedure for Interaction Evaluation

Simone Borsci¹, Robert D. Macredie¹, Julie Barnett¹, Jennifer Martin², Jasna Kuljis¹, Terry Young¹

*¹Brunel University, School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics,
Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK ²University of Nottingham,
Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University Park,
Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK*

RUNNING HEAD: *Reviewing and Extending the Five-user Assumption*

Corresponding Author's Email address: simone.borsci@brunel.ac.uk

Brief Authors' Biographies:

Simone Borsci is a cognitive scientist with an interest in Human-Computer Interaction; he is a Research Fellow on the MATCH program in School of Information Systems Computing and Mathematics at Brunel University, UK. **Robert Macredie** is a computer scientist with a background in Human-Computer Interaction; he is Professor of Interactive Systems in the School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics at Brunel University, UK. **Julie Barnett** is a social psychologist with an interest in the user needs theme within the MATCH program and she maintains a wide range of interests from policy to implementation; she is Professor of Health Research in the School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics at Brunel University, UK. **Jennifer Martin** is a Human Factors expert with an interest in medical device development; she is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering of the University of Nottingham, UK. **Jasna Kuljis** is a computer scientist with an interest in Human-Computer Interaction; she is Professor of Computing in the School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics at Brunel University, UK. **Terry Young** is the Principle Investigator of the MATCH program with an interest in medical device

development; he is Professor of Healthcare Systems in the School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics at Brunel University, UK.

ABSTRACT

The debate concerning how many participants represents a sufficient number for interaction testing is well-established and long-running, with prominent contributions arguing that five users provide a good benchmark when seeking to discover interaction design problems. We argue that adoption of five users in this context is often done with little understanding of the basis for, or implications of, the decision. In this paper we present an analysis of relevant research to clarify the meaning of the five-user assumption (Nielsen, 2000; Nielsen & Landauer, 1993) and to examine the way in which the original research that suggested it has been applied. This includes its seemingly blind adoption and application in some studies, and complaints about its inadequacies in others. We argue that the five-user assumption is often misunderstood, not only in the field of Human-Computer Interaction, but also in fields such as medical device design, or in business and information applications. The analysis that we present allows us to define a systematic approach for monitoring the sample discovery likelihood, in formative and summative evaluations, and for gathering information in order to take critical decisions during the interaction testing, while respecting the aim of the evaluation and the budget that is available. This approach – which we call the ‘Grounded Procedure’ – is introduced and its value argued.

1. INTRODUCTION

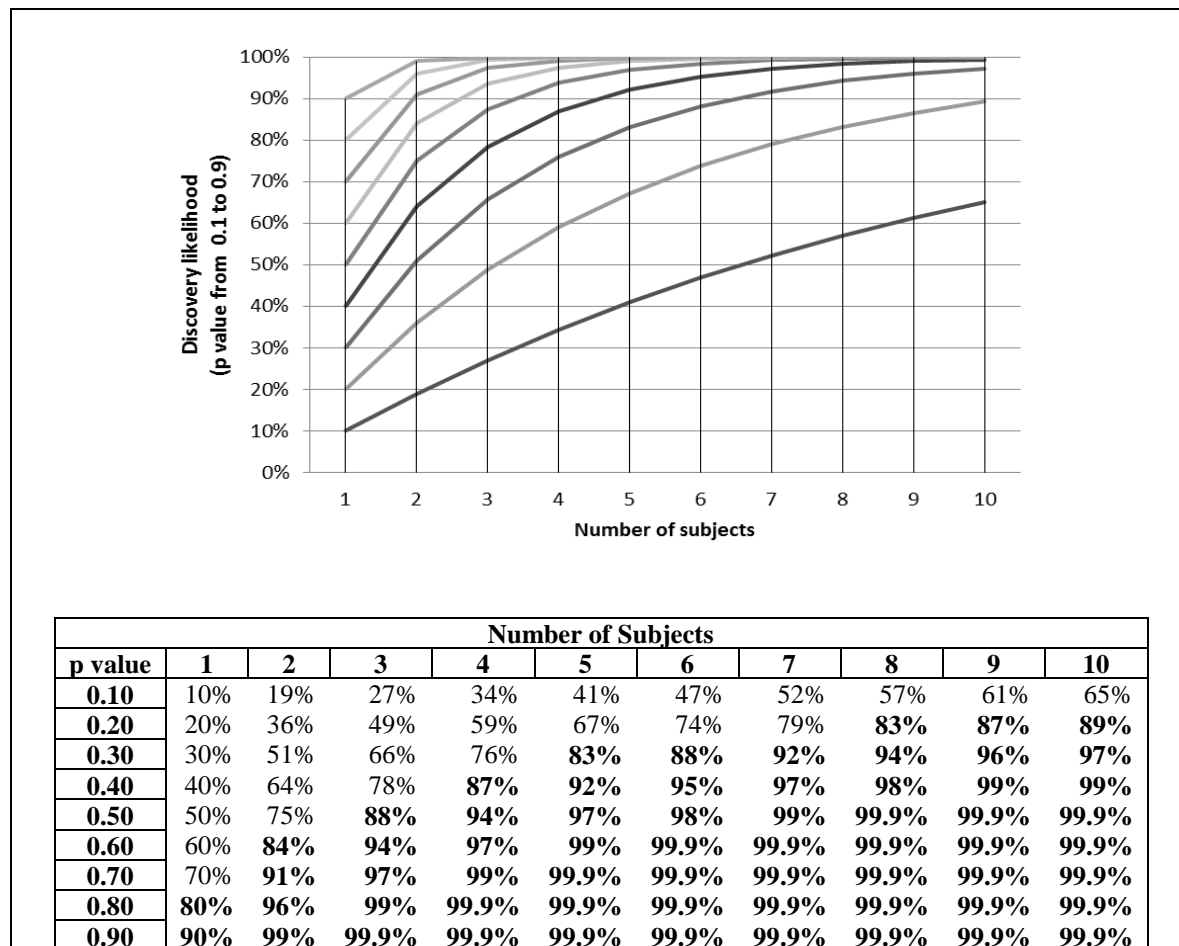
The recruitment and selection of subjects (i.e., users and experts) for usability tests, together with the minimum number of subjects required to obtain a set of reliable data, is a hotly-debated topic in technology evaluation (Lewis, 1994, 2006; Turner, Lewis, & Nielsen, 2006; Virzi, 1992). In the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), such evaluation is well-defined and integrated into the design process, and is used to ascertain the interaction properties of a given technology at reasonable cost and effort. For the purposes of this paper, we call the number of subjects, N , and the total percentage of errors or problems identified by the cohort of subjects, D . The discovery likelihood, p , denotes the average percentage of errors discovered by an expert, or of problems identified by users. The underpinning equation in evaluating error is focused on how many errors or problems remain undiscovered after N subjects have evaluated the product (Nielsen & Landauer, 1993) :

$$D = 1 - (1 - p)^N \quad (1)$$

We term this the *Error Distribution Formula*. The challenge in all of this is that neither p nor D is known, although clearly given one, the other can be readily calculated. This leaves those wishing to evaluate the usability of a product or service the inverse problem of whether N subjects have identified a sufficient number of problems to ensure that a given threshold percentage, D_{th} , of the total errors or problems has been exceeded in the evaluation.

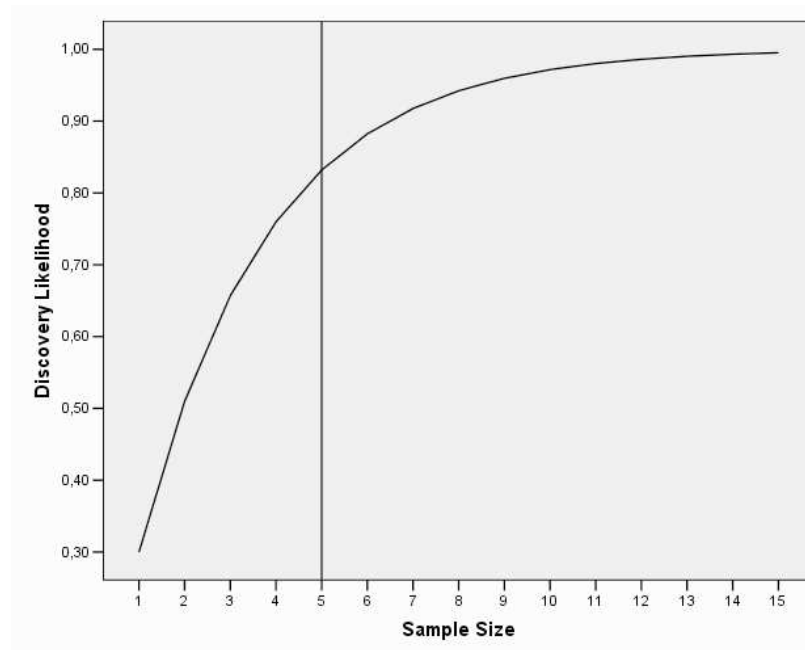
A straightforward approach to this has been to consider how many new errors or problems that each new subject identifies. This approach to equation 1 is the Return on Investment (ROI) model proposed by Nielsen and Landauer (1993), which assumes stochastic independence of the subjects in their evaluation of the product. Figure 1 shows the increase in D with increasing subjects for different average p -values from 0.10 to 0.90 for the model.

Figure 1. The discovery likelihood of a hypothetical sample of 10 increasing the p -values from 0.10 to 0.90.



The rationale of the ROI model is to infer the number of subjects required to exceed the threshold, D_{th} , based on the number of new problems or issues identified by each additional subject. Key to this is the analysis of the smaller increments in these problems/errors discovered by new subjects given a higher number of subjects who have already identified problems/errors. Thus, the experiment tends to an asymptotic saturation level where all of the errors have been found. In this context, and given an average p for each subject of around 0.30, identifying the first 80% of the problems/errors requires five subjects, while the next 19.5% requires a further 10. This represents a gain of less than a quarter, while trebling the evaluation cost/effort – a situation shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The asymptotic behavior of discovery likelihood of a hypothetical sample with $p=0.30$.



Nielsen and Landauer (1993) applied this model to analyzing data sets from verbal protocol techniques and expert-based evaluations and showed that a sample composed of a range of between three and five subjects with appropriate skills was generally enough to assess an interaction with a web interface and identify at least 80% of the interface problems. This result has been confirmed by several studies (Lewis, 1994, 2000, 2001, 2006; Nielsen, 2000; Turner, et al., 2006; Virzi, 1990, 1992) and is known as the ‘five-user assumption’ (Nielsen & Landauer, 1993). The model carries the latent assumption that p averages around 0.30 to exceed an acceptable threshold, D_{th} , of 80%. Although D is not highly-sensitive to variations in p so long as the average value for the cohort is used, there is an obvious complication. The perception of how close one is to identifying 100% of the issues or problems is sensitive to the order in which the ‘new’ subjects’ findings are added to the results of the cohort, if the subjects’ characteristic p -value varies. The approach to a false asymptote, for instance, could readily be presented, by listing the findings of higher p -value subjects before those of lower p -value subjects.

Nielsen (2000) invoked the five-user assumption in order to explain the ROI model, but from a historical point of view it has guided practitioners in scoping their evaluations. Today, the five-user assumption is widely used, and still recommended for many cases (see Nielsen, 2012), and also regularly condemned, suggesting that there is a need to revisit its application in order to set it on a firmer basis. The aim of this paper is therefore to survey the approaches to the equation behind the five-user assumption, to examine its use in evaluation, and to explore both the limits and advantages of the different approaches. Following this, we propose a novel pragmatic, or grounded, procedure to support evaluators in managing and monitoring the number of problems discovered by a sample of users.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Over the years, the HCI community has sought different ways to estimate the p -value, usually by re-examining the contribution made by each subject in a controlled trial, and then by extrapolating or reconfiguring the findings. The aim has been mainly to control the cost of evaluation by keeping the number of subjects to a minimum within the constraint of exceeding a notional threshold for the discovery of problems/errors. Approaches have focused on such factors as the order of the subjects in the evaluation (Nielsen & Landauer, 1993), the nature of the errors and problems identified by the sample (Turner, et al., 2006), and the properties of the interface (Borsci, Londei, & Federici, 2011).

From the 1960s to the 1980s two main barriers prevented developers from adopting a systematic approach to evaluation in the design cycle. The first was the idea that assessment was only a verification process and was separate from the design process. This led to the second issue, which was that developers considered the cost of evaluation to be additional to, and not a critical part of, the design process. By the 1980s, designers and researchers had begun to experiment with the concept of a ‘simulated user’, looking for the most effective and efficient principles that would guide interface-developers (Molich & Nielsen, 1990; Shneiderman, 1986). Focused on the artifact being evaluated, this approach was developed by simulating the users’ needs, and defined by Kurosu (2007) as the ‘small usability approach’, where evaluation was only a secondary step to verify the quality of the design and of the artifact’s functionality.

By contrast, Norman (Norman, 1983, 1988; Norman & Draper, 1986) proposed a new design philosophy at the end of the 1980s, User Centered Design (UCD), which integrated both design and evaluation by focusing on the properties of the interface needed to meet the users’ needs. Designers eschewed this approach for a period, considering it an ideal rather than a pragmatic or even a necessary way forward. This behavior was justified on the grounds that developers were focused on controlling the costs of design, and were therefore looking for low-cost techniques instead of what might be seen as a ‘grand scheme’.

This raised interesting questions about the cost of design in the context of whole-life costs, but it was not until 1998 that the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) explicitly endorsed the UCD process under ISO 9241-11(1998), after which designers were forced to adopt a new perspective. Kurosu (2007) identified this as the ‘big usability approach’, in which the evaluation is fully integrated into the product development cycle in the context of user needs. This ISO standard also presents a perspective from which a single technique is no longer sufficient to evaluate usability on its own, but where such techniques become part of a multidimensional construct. Following this approach, a practitioner applies different evaluation techniques and tools and involves the final users in interaction assessment. As ISO 9241-11 was widely taken up, it supported developers by creating a framework for evaluation while increasing costs by mandating the involvement of users.

The ROI approach to the Error Distribution Formula, at least until 2001, was seen as the only reliable way to comply with the standard while managing costs. In 2001, a series of studies started to challenge the ROI model and its five-user assumption, splitting the evaluation community into two broad camps: those who seem to accept and apply the model; and those who are, to varying degrees, critical of it even if they use it in their research.

2.1. Views on the five-user assumption

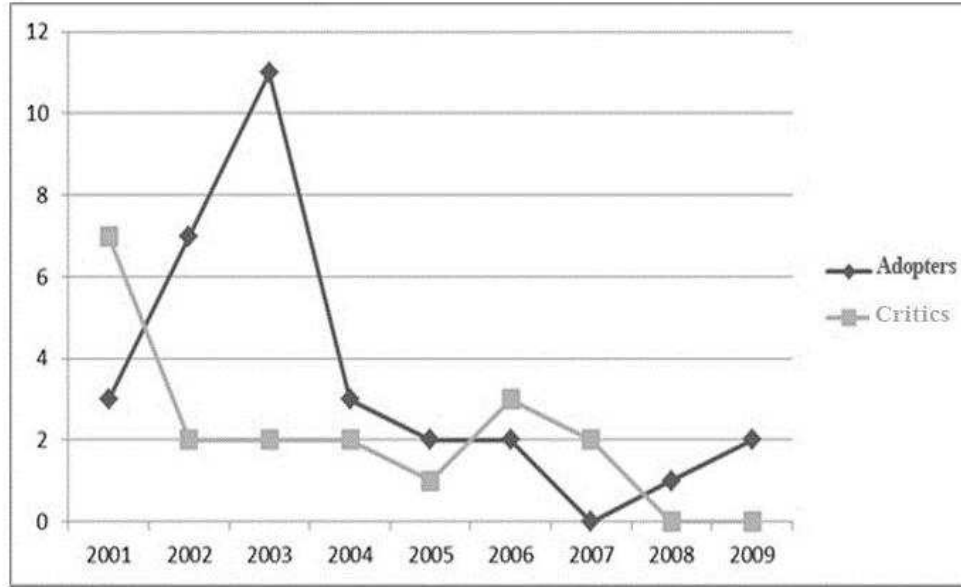
Spool and Schroeder (2001) provided one of the first studies post Nielsen (2000) that reflected on the five-user assumption, reporting an experiment in which they found that five users were far too few to reach the threshold discovery percentage suggested by Nielsen. They described an evaluation of four web sites by 49 subjects, reporting that to identify more than 85% of the problems required considerably more than five subjects. Until then, the five-user assumption had been generally accepted as a reliable guideline. Almost a decade later, Alshamari and Mayhew (2009, p. 403) contrasted Nielsen's (2000) expectation that five users would unearth 80-85% of the issues with Lindgaard and Chatratichart's (2007) study that identified only 35%, showing on-going concern about the five-user assumption. Indeed, studies that identify a lower discovery rate than Nielsen's (2000) expectation are now relatively common.

Of those studies that demonstrate discovery rate issues, Faulkner's (2003) exploration of discovery rate appears relatively comprehensive, reporting an evaluation of a website interface by 60 subjects and then with sub-samples of five, 10 and 15 users, up to 55 subjects. Faulkner concluded that "the risk of relying on any one set of five users was that nearly half of the identified problems could have been missed; however, each addition of users markedly increased the odds of finding the problems" (Faulkner, 2003, p. 381). This study has been highly influential, especially with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) which recently included it in their draft guidance on medical device testing (FDA, 2011) as an appendix entitled: "Considerations for Determining Sample Sizes for Human Factors Validation Testing". The FDA guidance recommends a sample of 15 subjects to find a minimum of 90% and an average of 97% of all problems (FDA, 2011, p. 37), and it is interesting to note the application of Faulkner's (2003) findings well beyond mainstream HCI.

The continued interest in, and diverging views on, the five-user assumption in relation to the ROI model can be seen through an analysis of research that has cited Nielsen and Landauer's (1993) original work. 50 post-2001 citations of Nielsen and Landauer (1993), were identified using Google Scholar, with the citations appearing in peer-reviewed journal articles (56%), conference papers (28%), book sections (14%), and industrial or company reports (2%) (as of 1 March 2012, the latest citation being from 2009).

Figure 3 shows the number of 'adopters' and 'critics' in the citation sample. The adopters group contains 31 pieces of work that have simply adopted the five-user assumption in their studies. In many of these cases, there is an acknowledgement of the limitations associated with the five-user assumption, but it is adopted regardless. An example of this can be seen in Crystal and Greenberg (2005, p. 7) who state that: "This sample size is not intended to yield definitive results, but models of usability testing (Nielsen & Landauer, 1993) suggest that testing with five users is sufficient to uncover most usability problems". The 19 critical references are more explicit in raising the shortcoming of the five-user assumption and draw on sources that have raised serious concerns about its validity. An example of this is seen in Hong, Heer, Waterson, and Landay (2001, p. 261), who state that: "Despite previous claims that about five participants are enough to find the majority of usability problems (Virzi 1992; Nielsen & Landauer 1993), a recent study by Spool and Schroeder (2001) suggests that this number may be nowhere near enough."

Figure 3. Analysis of 50 2001 to 2009 citations of Nielsen and Landauer's (1993) work obtained using Google Scholar on 1 March 2012. The 'adopters' comprises 31 references, while the 'critics' comprises 19 references.



Of the 50 papers identified, 78% were HCI studies while the remaining 22% were related studies from application areas including healthcare, automotive engineering, and business and information management. Of the 11 papers from outside the HCI area, nine were 'adopters' and two were 'critics', demonstrating that the application of the ROI model extends beyond HCI and into justifying the appropriateness of a given sample size for user evaluation in other fields.

The continued interest in the ROI model and five-user assumption, whether seen from the perspective of its continued application in HCI evaluation studies or from the more critical perspective which argues its weaknesses, suggests that it would be valuable to offer improvements to the basis on which the sample size judgment is made when using the ROI model.

2.2. Alternative models for estimating p

Several methodological developments have been proposed to this end, largely focusing on better estimates of p and, by association, N . First, the Good Touring procedure, developed by Turner, Lewis, and Nielsen (2006), seeks to adjust and normalize the p -value, as proposed by Hertzum and Jacobsen (2003). This process produces a more conservative estimate of p , which is desirable since overestimating p leads to the belief that one is closer to D_{th} for a given N than is actually the case. However, this gain comes at the expense of increased computational complexity and less insight. The Good Touring procedure formula is expressed as follows:

$$D = \frac{1}{2} \left[\left(\frac{P_{est}}{1 + \frac{E(M_1)}{M}} \right) + \left[\left(P_{est} - \frac{1}{n} \right) + \left(1 - \frac{1}{n} \right) \right] \right] \quad (2)$$

In equation (2), P_{est} is the initial estimate computed from the raw data of a usability study, $E(MI)$ is the number of usability problems detected by the first user, M is the total number of unique usability problems detected by all users, and n is the number of test participants.

Second, the Monte Carlo re-sampling method is a statistical simulation technique that has been used to simulate the impact of the subjects taking part in the evaluation in different orders (for a review, see: Fishman, 1995). Lewis (1994, 2000) applied this in conjunction with the Good Touring procedure and showed that it delivers a more conservative and more reliable value of p than the classic ROI model.

Third, the Bootstrap Discovery Behavior model, proposed by Borsci, Federici, and Londei (2011; see also Borsci, Federici, Mele, Polimeno, & Londei, 2012) is another re-sampling method that builds on the Good Touring and Monte Carol methods. It adopts a bootstrapping approach (Efron, 1979; Fox, 2002) and modifies the ROI equation (1) as follows:

$$D_{(L)} = M_t[a - (1 - p)^{L+q}] \quad (3)$$

In equation (3), M_t represents the total number of problems in the interface. The value a is the representativeness of the sample expressed as the maximum limit value of problems collected by 5000 possible bootstrap samples (with repetition). The value p represents the normalized mean of the number of problems found by each subsample, as the estimated probability of the detection of a generic problem by an evaluator in the chosen population. The q variable expresses the hypothetical condition $L = 0$ (an analysis without evaluators). In other words, since D does not vanish when $L = 0$, $D(0)$ represents the number of evident problems that can be effortlessly detected by any subject, and q the possibility of detecting a certain number of problems that have already been identified (or are evident to identify) and were not addressed by the designer, as expressed in equation (3a):

$$D_{(0)} = M_t[a - (1 - p)^q] \quad (3a)$$

The value q represents the properties of the interface from the evaluation perspective, with its extreme value being the ‘zero condition’ where no problems are found. The Bootstrap Discovery Behavior model (as expressed in equation (3)) enlarges the perspective of analysis by adding two new parameters not considered in equation (1): (i) all the possible discovery behaviors of participants (a); and (ii) a rule in order to select the representative data (q). In this sense, the Bootstrap Discovery Behavior model proposes a modification of the ROI model to include new factors within the sample discovery likelihood estimation.

The modifications to the original ROI model all require assumptions or estimations in order to make use of them for practical interface evaluation studies. As Sauro and Lewis (2012) note, it is possible in the modified models to apply the logit-normal-binomial (LBN) proposed by Schmettow (2009) to estimate the p value, and to use the zero-truncated LBN to estimate the number of remaining defects in the product. Although the LBN model has a number of potential applications in HCI, as Schmettow makes clear, the zero-truncated LBN “still makes assumptions and it is unclear how these are satisfied for typical data sets in the wild” (2012, p. 68). As such, there are always uncertainties and assumptions in the use of such models, making it critical that evaluators understand their basis and limitations rather than simply using the model

and adopting what may have become an established assumption, as seems to be the case for some researchers with respect to the five-user assumption.

The next section will consider the ROI model in more detail, stressing its strengths and weaknesses and using them to frame the steps that an evaluator should take in order to make most effective use of the model in their specific evaluation context. This will lead to the presentation of an approach – the Grounded Procedure – which we argue can guide decision-making in relation to the most suitable user sample size given the evaluation aims and budget constraints.

3. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ROI MODEL AND KEY DECISIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ITS EFFECTIVE USE

As noted in section 1, the ROI model is an application of the Error Distribution Formula (equation 1). This simple formula has several characteristic benefits. First, it is accessible, provides insight into error distribution which can guide evaluation, and is easy to apply. Second, it provides a way into a dialogue about the cost and effectiveness of an evaluation, as is the case through its application in the ROI model. Third, as an established approach, and through the ROI model, it exerts a standardizing influence on the industry, providing an accepted approach to evaluation that is widely used. Fourth, with the five-user assumption it provides a basis for evaluation that is useful in many instances and is better than doing nothing or being paralyzed by lack of knowledge. Fifth, it is relatively insensitive to small variations in parameter values and, providing the discussion is kept broad, yields a coherent, numerate basis for a discussion around the emerging range of users required in a given evaluation context (i.e., it will differentiate clearly between the need for 15, as opposed to 5 users, but not necessarily between 5 and 6).

There are, however, two broad problems with the model: (i) since the extent of the problem-space (or issue-space) is never known, one is always left to apply the model in an inverse fashion; and (ii) its simplicity means that the complexities of the real world may not be considered or identified by evaluators – which may be behind the ‘blind adoption’ issue in relation to the five-user assumption. In relation to this second point, a range of resultant drawbacks have been articulated in the literature. First, the ROI model is based on the idea that all the subjects exhibit the same probability of encountering usability problems, without reference to their varying skills (Caulton, 2001). Second, in many practical cases there is an additional problem in assuming that all subjects meet or approach the $p=0.30$ criterion (Schmettow, 2008; Woolrych & Cockton, 2001). Third, the ROI model does not account for the evaluation methodology or the context of the system being evaluated. Fourth, nor does it address the representativeness of the participants. In fact, there are several concepts bound up in the p -value that require unpacking – the ability of subjects to identify issues may also reflect the extent to which they represent the community of users and are representative of them. This, in turn, leads back to the nature of the evaluation being undertaken and draws into question whether a model developed for interface assessment can be applied directly to, for example, medical device evaluation with their specialist cohorts of users. Fifth, the ROI model takes a limited view of discoverability and the philosophical question as to whether errors that are never discovered by anyone are errors at all. Related to this is the ‘zero condition’ described by Nielsen and Mack (1994).

This discussion brings three factors to the fore. First, the Error Distribution Formula provides an elegant and informative way to assess the number of subjects needed in an evaluation. Second, its very elegance means that it is not difficult to find situations where the requirement for 80% of the issues to be identified by five users who share a value of p close to 0.30 do not come together conveniently to meet the five-user assumption when the p -value is estimated as an average (Schmettow, 2008; Woolrych & Cockton, 2001). Some of the contexts in which the formula has been shown to ‘fail’ to help developers and evaluators are far removed from the original context. Finally, just as evaluation is a cost-effectiveness exercise, so, too, is the business of estimating the appropriate number of users in that assessment. Therefore, we recognize that there are scenarios in which it is safe to proceed with the five-user assumption. Typically these may be where the cost of errors or undiagnosed issues is low, where the assessors are known to be able to identify most of the issues or problems (i.e., they are characterized by a p -value close to, or exceeding, 0.30), or where there are no overriding constraints of safety or success and a decision must be made quickly.

On the other hand, where there are overriding reasons to characterize the evaluation very accurately, there are ways of improving upon the simple formula and customizing the findings to the context and skills of the evaluators. This may also be the case where evaluation frequently takes place, and always within a well-controlled environment, where the cost of the extra process of reviewing the sample size (N) may be set against savings in the evaluation that may be reaped over and over again.

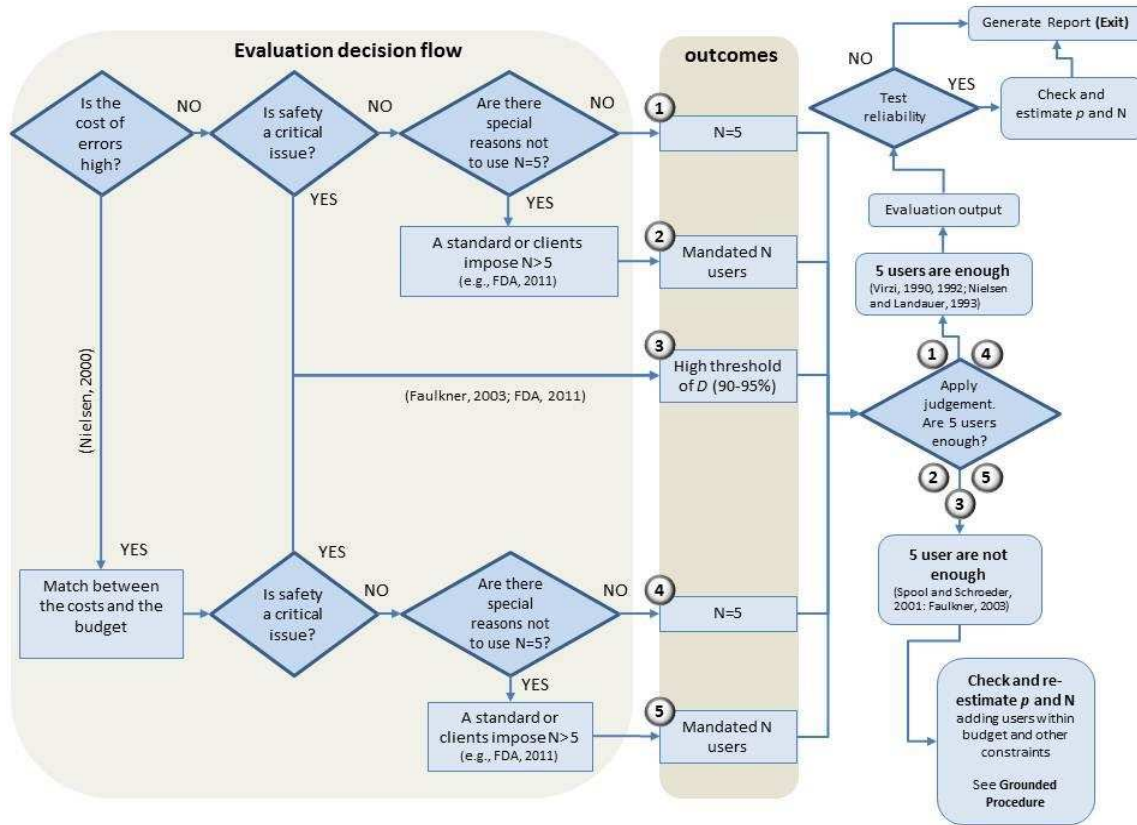
In the latter cases, we note that it would be possible to produce very accurate, well-calibrated formulae, refined and characterized through frequent use, but the cost would be complex algorithms for estimating N and significant data-collection to inform and validate such algorithms.

Figure 4 seeks to bring these constraints together, noting that it may be a good decision to adopt the five-user assumption, but also illustrating where a more nuanced judgment around sample size is required. As Figure 4 shows, the evaluation decision process considers three main constraints:

1. The costs of error identification against the available budget;
2. The kind of product and the level of safety required for optimal interaction;
3. The external issues that may require evaluation with more than five users.

When none of these constraints affect the evaluation, or when only the costs of error identification is considered to be an important issue (i.e., where only a low evaluation budget is available), the outcomes of the decision process (cases 1 and 4 in Figure 4) support the decision to test the product only with five users, or with two or three different groups composed of three to five users of each kind (see Nielsen, 2000).

Figure 4. The decision process and outcomes associated with using the five-user model, and the identification of cases where and alternative sample should be used.



In this case, a check test of the p -value of the sample aims only to identify how many problems have been discovered by the N users actually involved in the evaluation. The client, after the generation of the evaluation report, will have to decide whether to increase the budget in order to improve the reliability of the assessment by running a second evaluation process, adding more users in order to extend the reliability of the evaluation until a certain p -value threshold is reached.

In cases where the product being evaluated requires a specific level of safety, the evaluation process must aim to identify a high percentage of interaction problems – i.e., $D=90-95\%$ (case 3 in Figure 4). In this case the evaluator cannot assume that five users is a large enough sample, but s/he can use the first five users as a starting point for the assessment, by estimating the p -value using the different models introduced in section 2.2 in order to determine information about how many problems are discovered by the actual sample, and if or when the D threshold (D_{th}) is reached.

In cases where a N higher than five is imposed on the evaluator (cases 2 and 5 in Figure 4), the estimation of p is a necessary step for optimizing and controlling the use of the budget. In such cases D_{th} is not necessary set higher than the ‘standard’ 80-85%, but until D_{th} is reached it will be necessary to add new users to the sample and, with each added user, for the evaluator to

check the sample p -value and monitor the modification of the overall sample distribution after each single assessment.

As we will discuss in the next section, in order to generate the evaluation report when the decision process outcomes require a sample greater than five (i.e., cases 2, 3 and 5 in Figure 4), the evaluator has to follow a specific set of steps that we call the Grounded Procedure. We contend that this procedure is also useful when the five-user assumption is accepted (cases 1 and 4) if the evaluators have, for specific reasons, to test the reliability of their assessment.

4. A GROUNDED PROCEDURE: MONITORING AND ESTIMATING THE SAMPLE DISCOVERY LIKELIHOOD

The Grounded Procedure (GP) resonates with Lewis' contention that: "Practitioners can obtain accurate sample size estimates for problem-discovery goals ranging from 70% to 95% by making an initial estimate of the required sample size after running two participants, then adjusting the estimate after obtaining data from another two (total of four) participants" (2001, p. 474). We propose that in order to apply the ROI model in a useful way, practitioners should follow a specific procedure for assessing the evaluation process and then determining from the emerging findings how many more subjects are likely to be needed to meet their evaluation aims. The GP is therefore a dynamic process for collecting information about the sample discovery likelihood and taking subsequent decisions about the assessment. This procedure is based on three main assumptions:

1. An evaluation is a counterbalanced process in which the evaluators, in light of the aims and available budget, reduce the variability of the possible interaction behavior (i.e., the divergent user experiences), typifying the kinds of user that have to be involved in the assessment (i.e., through selection criteria), the tasks and the goals of the interaction, and the environment of use.
2. These reductions in the variability, along with the available budget and the evaluation aim (e.g., to identify more than the 85% of the problems), lead practitioners to select specific evaluation techniques to be used and the form of the evaluation process (i.e., summative or formative) so affecting the resulting data that is gathered (see for a complete review: Tullis & Albert, 2008, pp. 15-44).
3. By monitoring the sample discovery likelihood after the first three or four users, practitioners, as Lewis (2001) suggests, can obtain reliable information about the gathered data in order to determine whether the problems discovered by the sample have a certain level of representativeness (i.e., reliability and quality).

We propose that practitioners start by assuming a specific p -value standard (e.g., 0.30 if the aim is to reach the 80-85% of the problems), and use this value as a comparator against which the behavior of the real population of subjects can be assessed. In light of this, practitioners have to compare the p -value of their actual tested sample to the standard in order to make the following two main judgments, leading to the associated decisions and actions:

1. *If the sample fits the standard*: report the results to the client and determine whether the product should be re-designed or released.
2. *If the sample does not fit the standard*: add more users to the sample and re-test the p -value in a cyclical way until the pre-determined percentage of problems (D_{th}) is reached.

This illustrates that the GP consists of an information-seeking process that aims to obtain reliable evidence for deciding whether practitioners have to extend their evaluation by adding users or whether they can stop the evaluation because they have sufficient information. The GP consists of three main steps:

1. *Monitoring the errors and problems*: a table of problems/errors is constructed to analyze the number of discovered problems, the number of users that have identified each problem (i.e., the weight) and the average p -value of the sample;
2. *Refining the p -value*: a range of models are applied and then the number of users required reviewed in the light of the emerging p -value;
3. *Taking a decision based on the sample behavior*: the p -value is used to apply the *Error Distribution Formula* and take a decision on the basis of the available budget and evaluation aim.

Each of these steps will be discussed in turn, drawing on an example scenario throughout, to provide more detail.

4.1. Monitoring the table of problems/errors

When practitioners run an evaluation using a sample of experts (i.e., an expert-based test), these subjects, simulating the final user group's interaction with the product and following an explicit or implicit user model, identify a certain number of errors related to the technological functioning that could affect, and cause problems in, the final users' experiences. When practitioners assess the interaction with a sample of final users (i.e., a user-based test), these subjects identify interaction problems that may arise from errors in the technological functioning or a miss-match between the designer's and the user's mental models of the product (see for a complete framework on mental models: Norman, 1983, 1988). Whether experts or target users are engaged in the evaluation, the practitioner collects a series of subjects' behaviors each instance of which can be represented in a binary way: i) 0 = Problem/error not found; ii) 1 = Problem/error found.

As a consequence, a large group of subjects has a higher probability of identifying a larger number of problems than a small group because a large group has greater scope for divergent behavior than does a small one. In this sense, the aim of any estimation model is not to identify how many users are needed for an evaluation, but to identify the smallest group with the greatest quality of discoverability behavior (that is, p -value). In this context, the quality of the behavior is seen as the ability of a small sample to best represent the behavior of a larger sample. We can thus define the representativeness of a sample as the degree to which the problems/errors

identified by the sample accurately and precisely represent the interaction problems that can be identified by all possible users/experts of a specific product.

Figure 5 shows an example taken from Turner et al. (2006); the number of problems/errors collected by the first eight users in this example is four. From this table practitioners can calculate the weight of each identified problem/error and the raw p -value, which in this example, following the ROI model, is equal to 0.38.

Figure 5. Example of discovery likelihood of eight subjects. From this table, a practitioner may analyze the behavior of each subject, controlling for each problem how many subjects has identified it. The weight of each problem is calculated as the sum of users that have detected it, while the count of the problems identified by each subject is used for calculating the raw p -value, and the means of calculating each individual's p -value.

4 kind of Problems/Errors

Subject	Problems/Errors Number				Count	p
	1	2	3	4		
1	1	0	1	0	2	0.5
2	1	0	1	1	3	0.75
3	1	0	0	0	1	0.25
4	0	0	0	0	0	0
5	1	0	1	0	2	0.5
6	1	0	0	0	1	0.25
7	1	1	0	0	2	0.5
8	1	0	0	0	1	0.25
Count	7	1	3	1		0.38
Raw p value	0.875	0.125	0.375	0.125		

Weight of the problems

The Raw p value

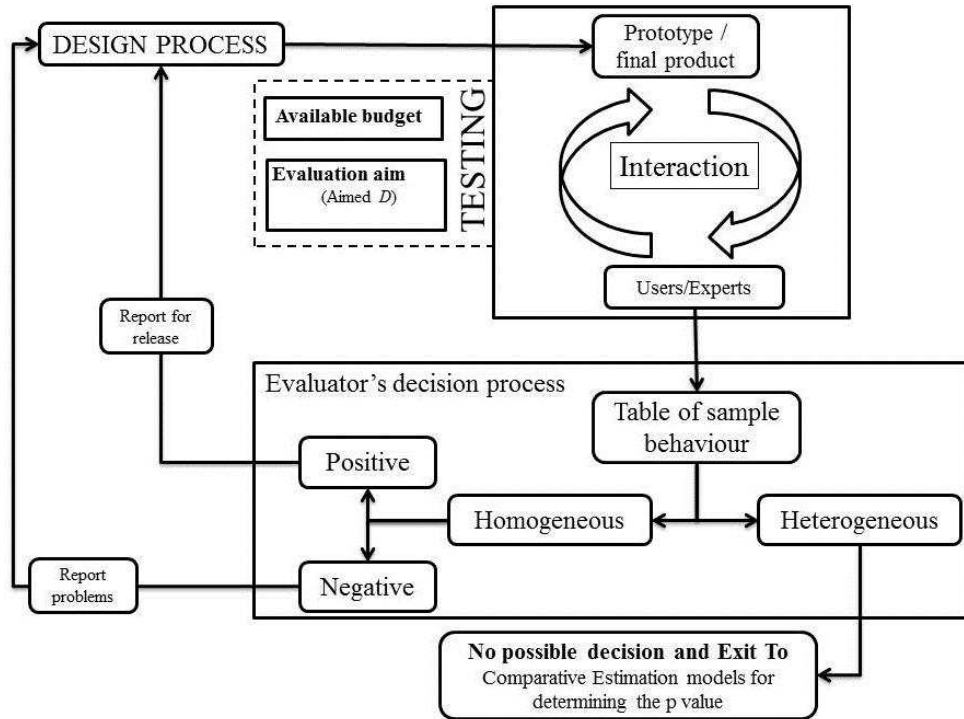
By organizing the data in this way the practitioners can make an important judgment about the sample's behavior in discovering problems. The sample may demonstrate *homogeneous behavior*, which means that the sample has a coherent rate of discovering problems. There are two cases of homogeneous behavior. The first is where all of the users have found all of the problems/errors (i.e., negative homogeneity). In this case the p -value would be equal to 1 and the practitioner would have reliable information for arguing that there were many problems/errors in the product that were evident and important. The sample's homogeneous negative behavior could be used to propose re-design of the product to solve these errors/problems, with a subsequent new evaluation of the updated design. The second case is where none of the users identify any problems (i.e., positive homogeneity). In this ideal condition the p -value is equal to 0 and the evaluators can report to the client that the technology is ready for release or for a large-scale evaluation. A p -value very close to 0 is usually the result of a test-retest process, in which the product has already been evaluated and re-designed, perhaps several times, so increasing the difficulties in, and reduced likelihood of, problem identification.

Alternatively, the sample may demonstrate *heterogeneous behavior*, which means that the sample has identified a certain number of problems/errors with different weights. This heterogeneity of problem identification clearly shows to practitioners that there are a certain

number of problems in the product, but it cannot inform evaluators about the representativeness of the sample and the reliability of the data – this can be analyzed only by testing the sample p -value through the estimation models. As noted earlier, when the aimed-for percentage of discovered problems (D_{th}) is 80-85%, a p -value equal to or greater than 0.30 is required (see the discovery likelihood distribution in Figure 1).

While homogeneity of sample behavior leads practitioners to obtain reliable information (prompting re-design or release decisions), most evaluation studies will identify some degree of heterogeneity within the sample behavior. When the sample has a heterogeneous behavior, practitioners do not have enough information to make an informed re-design/release decision and consequently they have to analyze the p -value and, in line with their aim and budget constraints, consider adding more users to the sample in order to provide the quality of information needed to take an informed decision. This can be seen in Figure 6, which presents a model of the GP process, showing how it makes use of the table of problem/errors derived from the sample behavior to inform decision-making.

Figure 6. The application of the GP analysis of the table of sample behavior in order to drive the evaluator's decision process depending on whether the sample behavior is heterogeneous or homogeneous.



4.2. Refining the p -value

We have already shown how practitioners can construct a table of a study sample's behavior (Figure 5) and use this to calculate a raw p -value based on the average p of each user; in our

example, p is equal to 0.38. By applying the ROI model with this discovery rate, we can estimate that the first four subjects will identify more than the 85% of the interface's problems. Unsurprisingly, in light of the different parameters that they consider, when the Grand Touring, Monte Carlo analysis and the Bootstrap Discovery Behavior model are used, more conservative p -value estimates are produced (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The estimation of the p -values of the sample analyzed in Figure 4 as a result of applying different estimation models: Grand Touring; Monte Carlo; and Bootstrap Discovery Behavior. The p -values estimated with the models (p_{GT} , p_{MC} , p_{BDB}) show that the discovery likelihood of this sample, composed of eight subjects, is enough to identify more than the 80% of the problems in the product under evaluation.

Grand Touring		Monte Carlo		Bootstrap Discovery Behavior	
p_{GT}	> 80% of the problems	p_{MC}	> 80% of the problems	p_{BDB}	> 80% of the problems
0.235	8 subjects	0.221	8 subjects	0.215	8 subjects

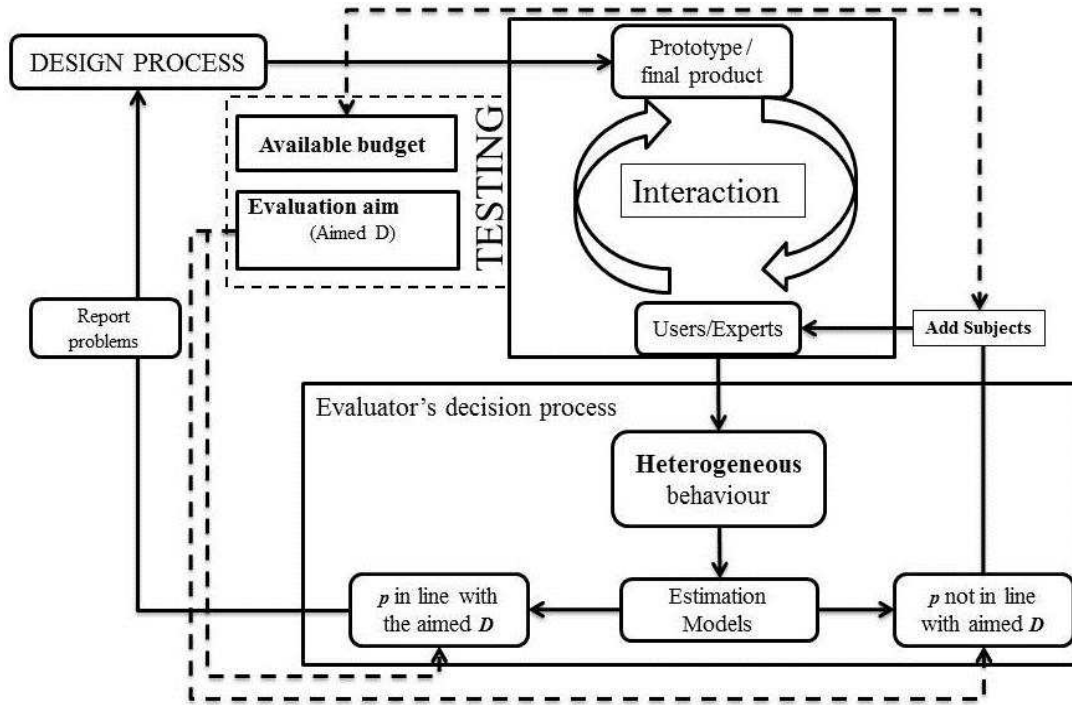
In our example, after the first eight subjects have been studied, the practitioner can apply all of the estimation models and estimate that the study sample has a discovery likelihood ranging from 0.38 to 0.215 ($M=0.265$). By using the lowest p -value (in this case $p_{BDB}=0.215$) and the mean ($p_M=0.265$), the practitioner can argue that between six and eight subjects are needed to identify more than 85% of the problems associated with this product. In this case, we have applied the estimation model after the first eight subjects, but the models could be applied after the first four or five participants and the same results obtained.

We suggest that, instead of adopting a unique number provided by a specific estimation model, practitioners should rely on a range of values. This decision will, though, depend on the practitioners' budget, since the analysis of a range of p -values is more expensive than a test based on a single value. Practitioners can address this problem by using, as indicated above, only p_M for defining the sample likelihood so reducing the costs and the overestimation of the p -value.

4.3. Taking a decision on the basis of the sample behavior

As sections 4.1 and 4.2 have illustrated, in case of heterogeneous sample behavior the GP is a procedure for organizing the evaluation data, calculating the sample behavior and conducting a comparative analysis of different estimation models on the basis of the information from the tested sample (see Figure 8 for a model of this process).

Figure 8. The application of the GP comparative analysis of the models for estimating the sample p -value, and the possible actions and decisions when the p is, or is not, in line with the aimed-for D (D_{th}).



As Figure 8 shows, practitioners analyzing the data from the first X subjects, and estimating the p -value, may obtain two kinds of information. The first case is where the p -value is equal to or higher than the standard set for reaching the evaluation aim (D). In this case the sample has already discovered a level of problems that reaches the aimed-for D (D_{th}). For instance, if D_{th} is 90-95%, the p -value is in line with D when five users have a $p=0.40$, but also when seven users have a $p=0.30$ and so on, increasing the N in line with the available budget. Of course, the primary goal of the evaluation is to use the available budget in the optimum way by trying to obtain the aimed-for D with the fewest users (lowest N) possible. When the p -value is in line with the D_{th} the practitioner is in a position to generate the evaluation report and recommend a decision to the client.

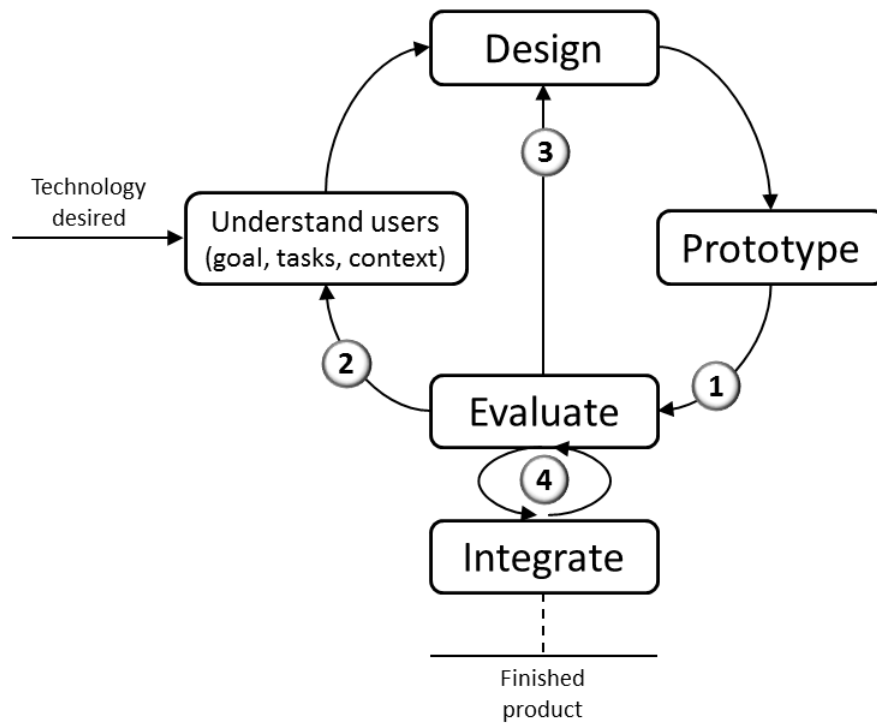
The second case is where the p -value is lower than the standard set for reaching the evaluation aim. In this case the sample cannot offer enough information to the evaluators for generating a report; the practitioner, respecting the available budget, has to enlarge the sample (i.e., adding users and increasing the N) in order to discover more problems until the aimed-for D is reached. As previously discussed, when the actual sample has a p -value that is not in line with the aimed-for D , it is necessary to increase the sample size (N) in order to align the p -value to D_{th} . For instance, if with five users the p -value is equal to 0.30 and D_{th} is equal to 90-95%, five users are shown to be not enough and at least other two users would have to be added to the sample.

When practitioners invest in adding new users they are seeking to improve the discovery likelihood of the sample, but this investment is a risk. Enlarging the sample by adding new users can decrease the sample's p -value if, for instance, these new users identify only problems that have already been found by the previous users or, the worst case, these new users identify no problems at all. In such cases, the practitioners may have made a poor choice in the recruitment of the additional users, which may lead them to reconsider the selection criteria used. However, when new and well-selected users are added to a sample, the number of problems identified usually increases, reducing the heterogeneity of the sample and leading to a higher p -value. At the end of this process, by comparing the obtained p -value with the aimed-for D (D_{th}) the practitioner will be in a position to decide whether to generate the evaluation report and recommend a decision to the client or to restart the evaluation cycle, again depending on available budget.

The ability of the GP to provide appropriate responses across the range of evaluation scenarios suggests, we would argue, that it is a systematic approach to the analysis of evaluation data that can be applied at different phases of, and used to inform, product development as part of a user-centered design approach (as suggested in Figure 9). For example, when the sample demonstrates positive homogeneous behavior, the practitioner can propose that the product be released, integrating the evaluation data in the product (point 4 in Figure 9). If the sample demonstrates negative homogeneous behavior, a strong redesign is required. In this case the evaluation results suggest: a) changes to the design to reflect a more realistic set of users' expectation (point 2) ; b) re-thinking the design as a result of the gathered data (point 3); or c) integrating the outcomes of the evaluation into the product and re-evaluating it (point 4).

On the other hand, when the sample behavior is heterogeneous (see Figure 8), the practitioner has to apply the estimation models in order to estimate the sample's p -value. If all of the estimation models confirm that the sample matches the standard (i.e., $p \geq 0.30$) the practitioner can propose a new design cycle re-visiting points 2, 3 and 4 of the design process in the light of the evaluation results. If the p -value does not match the standard then the practitioner has to add new subjects, drawing on the comparative analysis from the estimation models, in order to increase the discovery rate of the sample and so its representativeness.

Figure 9. The GP applied in the typical iterative User-Centered Design model and development process (adapted from Petrie and Bevan (2009)). The GP is useful at four points of the design process: 1) The evaluation of the prototype; 2) the definition and re-definition of the application desired; 3) the definition and re-definition of the design perspective; and 4) the integration of the evaluation data in the product after and before a new evaluation test.



4.4. Advantages and limitations of the Grounded Procedure

The estimation models that we have discussed in this paper have been applied with great success in the HCI field, in particular with web systems and interfaces. With these kind of technologies, a well-tested assumption is that to assess users' interaction practitioners have to consider the final user categories and sample them into multiple groups as follows (Nielsen, 1995): five subjects if testing one group of users; three or four subjects from each category if testing two groups of users; and three users from each category if testing three or more groups of users. This rule of Nielsen's (1995) is a result of the analysis of a large and reliable set of data collected by different evaluation studies.

Nielsen's comparative analysis has shown that adopting the five-user assumption is a good starting point for analyzing web systems interfaces but, as we have noted, it does not mean that five users is enough for an evaluation because the choice of sample number depends on the discovery likelihood of the sample. Nielsen's rule suggests that when computer or web interfaces are evaluated by specific evaluation techniques (e.g., the think aloud protocol for user-based evaluation, or heuristic analysis for expert-based assessment), a sample of five users or five experts is a good starting point for the evaluation because there is a high probability (but not

certainty) that such a sample has a high discovery likelihood rate (i.e., $p \geq 0.30$). In this context, the GP's value is that for a specific evaluation setting (that is, target product and chosen evaluation technique) it can help an evaluator to decide how to proceed with the evaluation after the first five users have been sampled.

Away from the five-user assumption, the identification of a more reliable starting number of subjects for evaluations in different contexts is one of the most interesting features, and advantages, that widespread use of the GP would provide. The diffusion of the methodology would allow comparative analyses of different evaluation studies carried out on the same technologies, with the same evaluation techniques and with similar samples to identify more reliable initial sample sizes. As an example, Borsci et al. (2011) have undertaken a comparative analysis of the estimation models in the field of assistive technologies and have identified that a reliable starting number of blind users for the evaluation of a screen reader, when the evaluation is carried out by a Partial Concurrent Thinking Aloud evaluation technique (Federici, Borsci, & Stamerra, 2010), ranges from six to 20 subjects. In particular, the GP could be extremely useful in those fields that are looking for a reliable and shared evaluation framework while having to control the costs of the assessment.

As such, much as in the 1990s the ROI model was developed to address website developers' needs to control evaluation costs, the GP can be used in the evaluation of different kinds of interactive technologies (e.g., assistive technologies, medical and industrial devices, mobile phones, etc.) which may have different requirements in terms of interaction safety. Within this context, the GP offers a way to control evaluation costs while assuring the representativeness of the sample and the associated quality of the evaluation data.

It is important to note here that the GP forces practitioners to manage and organize the gathered data in a specific way, and that the procedure of behavior analysis may be seen by evaluators as a restrictive organization of the data, and as requiring a time commitment that could prevent other kinds of analysis (e.g., environmental evaluation). We would suggest, though, that this objection may be overcome if the GP is used not as a meta-methodology but as a tool, together with other kinds of analysis in order to control the effectiveness and the efficiency of the sample evaluation.

5. CONCLUSION

By providing analysis of literature related to the p -value estimation and discussing the advantage and the weakness of the ROI model, this paper has presented a new perspective on the five-user assumption. We have argued that the question often posed by researchers in the field of whether five users is a sufficient number for usability testing is an unhelpful one. We have suggested instead that five subjects provides a good starting point for evaluating certain technologies (e.g., websites) with a certain evaluation technique (e.g., thinking aloud) and have shown that a five-subject sample is reliable only if it has a certain level of discovery likelihood (i.e., $p \geq 0.30$). In this sense, the only answer to the question of whether five users is or is not enough for a reliable evaluation is that it depends on the sample behavior, as this affects the reliability of the assessment and the representativeness of the gathered data.

We have proposed a method – the Grounded Procedure – that allows practitioners to analyze the reliability of the data from their usability tests, enabling them to estimate the sample size needed to identify a given proportion of interaction problems. This method provides an new perspective on the discovery likelihood and on designing evaluation studies and gives designers/manufacturers the means to use the data from their evaluations to inform critical system/product decisions, providing decision support on when to enlarge the sample, re-design, or release the product. It also allows the reliability of the evaluation to be calculated, which will help designers/manufacturers to conduct efficient evaluation studies thereby controlling costs, and will also enable them to demonstrate objectively the reliability of their evaluations to regulators and purchasers.

NOTES

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Authors' Present Addresses. Simone Borsci, Brunel University, School of Information Systems Computing and Mathematics, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: simone.borsci@brunel.ac.uk. Robert Macredie, Brunel University, School of Information Systems Computing and Mathematics, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: robert.macredie@brunel.ac.uk. Julie Barnett, Brunel University, School of Information Systems Computing and Mathematics, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: julie.barnett@brunel.ac.uk. Jennifer Martin, The University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, UK. E-mail: jennifer.martin@nottingham.ac.uk. Jasna Kuljis, Brunel University, School of Information Systems Computing and Mathematics, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: Jasna.kuljis@brunel.ac.uk. Terry Young, Brunel University, School of Information Systems Computing and Mathematics, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK. E-mail: terry.young@brunel.ac.uk.

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Figure Captions

- Figure 1. The discovery likelihood of a hypothetical sample of 10 increasing the p -values from 0.10 to 0.90.
- Figure 2. The asymptotic behavior of discovery likelihood of a hypothetical sample with $p=0.30$.
- Figure 3. Analysis of 50 2001 to 2009 citations of Nielsen and Landauer's (1993) work obtained using Google Scholar on 1 March 2012. The 'adopters' comprises 31 references, while the 'critics' comprises 19 references.
- Figure 4. The decision process and outcomes associated with using the five-user model, and the identification of cases where an alternative sample should be used.
- Figure 5. Example of discovery likelihood of eight subjects. From this table, a practitioner may analyze the behavior of each subject, controlling for each problem how many subjects has identified it. The weight of each problem is calculated as the sum of users that have detected it, while the count of the problems identified by each subject is used for calculating the raw p -value, and the means of calculating each individual's p -value.
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